

News



from the South Carolina Education Oversight Committee
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EDITOR'S NOTE: The EOC meeting will begin at 2 p.m., Thursday in Room 101 of the Solomon Blatt Building (corner of Assembly and Pendleton streets). Copy of the full Achievement Gap study is available on the EOC Web site at www.sceoc.org under Breaking News. Principals from three of the identified schools have been invited to present information about their efforts to reduce the achievement gap. They are Ms. Stephanie Strous of Stono Park Elementary School in Charleston County School District; Polly Elkins of East Elementary in Dillon School District Two, and June Lominack of Dutch Fork Elementary in Lexington/Richland School District Five.

107 SC elementary and middle schools identified in EOC study as reducing the achievement gap

Columbia – About 14 percent of South Carolina elementary and middle schools have been identified in a study released by the SC Education Oversight Committee Thursday as reducing the achievement gap for at least one historically underachieving student group.

In an annual achievement gap study using results of the 2003 Palmetto Achievement Challenge Test (PACT), 107 elementary and middle schools out of 844 statewide were shown to have high overall student achievement for at least one target subgroup - either African-American students or students participating in the free/reduced lunch program. The achievement gap was defined in the study as the differences in achievement between the target group (the lower-scoring demographic group) and the comparison group (the higher-scoring group) at various PACT performance levels (Basic, Proficient, Advanced).

Overall, the study reveals wide gaps in achievement among different ethnic and socioeconomic student groups in South Carolina.

EOC Research Director David Potter who presented the study said South Carolina is at a critical juncture in its journey to educational excellence.

He said if the state is to meet its educational goal of being in the top half of states nationally for student achievement by the year 2010 and to meet the federal requirements of No Child Left Behind in which 100 percent of students must score Proficient or Advanced by the year 2014, the state must focus its efforts to close and eventually eliminate the achievement gap.

“In addition to maintaining high levels of performance for all students, our lower scoring students must improve at an even greater rate than our higher scoring students,” said Potter. “If we are to prosper and remain competitive as a state and nation, we must eliminate the persistence of low achievement which prevents us from attaining our goals. Now is the time for action -- not more study.”

The average achievement of target groups (African American students and students eligible for the free or reduced lunch program) in schools identified as reducing the achievement gap was comparable to the high achievement levels attained by comparison groups (white students and pay lunch students) statewide. At least one target student group in the identified schools scored at the level of or higher than the performance of the comparison student group statewide for at least one of the two subject areas tested (English/language art or mathematics) on PACT.

For example, a school in which 36 of the 42 African-American students (85.7%) tested scored Basic or higher on the ELA test would be identified as a school closing the gap because 85.7% of the target group (African-American students) scored Basic or higher, which is greater than the 75th percentile for all students (81.1%). The following table presents the performance levels and the percentages schools had to meet for each target group for the 75th percentile and 90th percentile categories:

Target PACT Test Performance Levels	75th %ile and Above – All Students	90th %ile and Above – All Students
ELA % Basic or higher	81.1%	87.4%
Math % Basic or higher	84.7%	90.0%
ELA % Proficient or Advanced	36.8%	47.5%
Math % Proficient or Advanced	39.3%	47.5%

Principals and staff from many of the schools were on hand to hear the report and to be recognized by the committee. Three of the principals - Stephanie Strous of Stono Park Elementary School in Charleston County School District; Polly Elkins of East Elementary in Dillon School District Two, and June Lominack of Dutch Fork Elementary in Lexington/Richland School District Five presented information about strategies and programs in their schools that they believe are reasons for their school's success.

Potter said 33 schools out of the 107 had at least one target student group scoring at the level of the 90th percentile of all students statewide and 74 had at least one target student group scoring at the level of the 75th percentile of all students statewide.

“We have identified a group of schools in which African American and/or students participating in the free/reduced lunch program are performing at high levels,” he said. “We

wanted to see if there were places where achievement gaps among different student groups were being reduced and we found them. I think these schools show reducing the gap can be done in spite of high poverty and other risk factors.”

The EOC study focused on four areas:

1. The level of achievement gaps between the target groups and the comparison groups using National Assessment for Education Progress (NAEP) data from 1998 through 2003 in reading and mathematics.
2. The level of achievement gaps between the target groups and the comparison groups using 2002 and 2003 PACT data in ELA and mathematics.
3. The relationship between the achievement gap and a school's overall achievement using the 2003 Absolute Ratings.
4. The identification and characteristics of schools that were reducing the achievement gap for at least one target group in at least one subject area.

Some of the study's findings were:

- NAEP data reveals that while progress in math is encouraging, the achievement gaps at Proficient or Advanced levels are generally projected to widen. However, SC reading performance is less encouraging with low achievement at the Proficient or Advanced level among all student groups;
- A study by Education Trust reveals that by the 4th grade, SC African American students lag 2 years in learning behind White students.
- The largest gaps for all performance levels for both PACT ELA and mathematics are between African-American free/reduced lunch students and White pay lunch students.
- The smallest gaps were between African-American pay lunch students and White free/reduced lunch students.
- African American pay lunch students and White free/reduced lunch students scored at similar levels for ELA and mathematics.
- Excellent rated schools had the overall highest levels of achievement for all student groups. Unsatisfactory schools had the overall lowest levels of achievement for all student groups.
- The gap in the percentage of students scoring Proficient or Advanced between student groups was largest in Excellent schools and smallest in Unsatisfactory schools. (Note: An overwhelming majority of students scored very low in Unsatisfactory schools.)
- In Below Average rated schools, one in 10 African American free/reduced lunch students scored Proficient or Advanced.
- In Unsatisfactory rated schools, one in 20 African American free/reduced lunch students scored Proficient or Advanced.

- An analysis of report card data of identified schools reveal school profile characteristics similar to those of all elementary and middle schools; however, survey data from teachers, students and parents in identified schools show greater satisfaction with school learning environment, social and physical environment and home-school relations than schools statewide.

The study recommends the state focus attention to assistance being provided to students falling behind including increased instructional time and effective academic assistance plans.

“The study emphasizes the responsibility of everyone to improve children’s learning,” Potter said. “We must maintain an expectation that all students can achieve and that schools can be effective at closing achievement gaps.”